*A Learning Alberta*

# Advanced Education in Rural Alberta: Challenges And Opportunities

A Discussion Document

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## *A Learning Alberta*

Alberta will be a province where all Albertans have access to higher learning opportunities. It will be a province that aggressively seizes the opportunities of the future by leveraging the skills, talents and imaginations of its citizens. And it will be a province that will enjoy even greater success in the century ahead thanks to a solid foundation and legacy of higher learning that we will create together.

Albertans will be inspired to reach their full potential through advanced learning - to move beyond where they are now to where they can be. But most of all, Alberta will become a true learning province, where advanced education and lifelong learning is the cornerstone of a healthy, prosperous and progressive society.

Dave Hancock, Riverbend Ragg-Times

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# 1 Introduction

Ensuring access to high quality adult learning opportunities for all Albertans is a key priority for the Alberta government. "Leading in Learning" is highlighted as a pillar of the government's twenty-year strategic plan. In addition to "Leading in Learning", Advanced Education will play a key role under the other pillars: "Unleashing Innovation", "Competing in a Global Marketplace", and "Making Alberta the Best Place to Live and Work".

To meet the government's objectives, Advanced Education is endeavoring to expand the post-secondary system by 60,000 learning opportunities. Bill 1, the Access to the Future Act, and the review of Alberta's post-secondary system lay the groundwork to ensure high quality post-secondary education remains accessible and affordable.

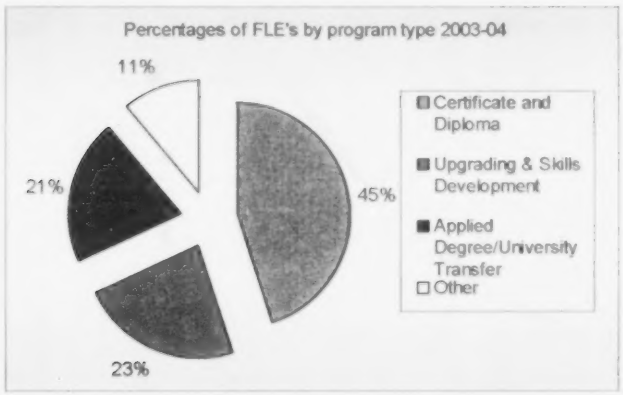
However, Alberta faces many challenges. Alberta's population of 18-24 year-olds is expected to decline within the next five years, and inter-provincial migration is showing signs of leveling off. Increasing participation rates of under-represented groups such as rural and Aboriginal Albertans is critical to the success of Alberta's access strategy. Rural post-secondary institutions will play a vital role in encouraging the participation of under-represented groups in higher learning. However, they cannot act in isolation from their community partners. Post-secondary institutions, Community Adult Learning Councils, Community Consortia, elementary and secondary schools, parents and students, and regionally based industries need to work together to leverage local capacity to increase access, and create a culture of learning. Increasing rural participation requires a higher degree of engagement and collaboration among community leaders and organizations– it requires a multi-sectoral approach to overcome the challenges faced by Alberta's rural regions.

The MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development made it clear in Rural Alberta, Land of Opportunity (RALO) that rural Albertans were not experiencing the same economic and social benefits as urban Albertans. Advanced Education was recognized as a key component in ensuring rural communities are vibrant and sustainable and have the capacity to succeed in a knowledge economy. The Alberta government agreed with the recommendations of the Steering Committee. "A Place to Grow": Alberta's Rural Development Strategy reinforces the government's commitment to increased access to support economic and community development. Strategies outlined in the report include enhanced financial assistance programs (such as bursaries for rural students), programs to raise awareness about post-secondary opportunities, and methods to foster community collaboration. The Alberta government is committed to working with community-based organizations, institutions, and industries to develop creative solutions to revitalize Alberta's rural areas.

The 2005-08 Business Plan for Alberta Advanced Education includes specific strategies to enhance participation by Aboriginal and rural Albertans. A critical feature of these strategies will include enhanced awareness and planning for advanced education, increased financial support for rural learners, and working with local communities to broaden the range of adult learning opportunities (Appendix 5.8). Under A Learning Alberta, Advanced Education is beginning the process of reviewing the adult learning system to ensure high quality adult education remains accessible and affordable. This document has been prepared to support the review process by providing a context for consideration of key issues.

### 1.1 System Overview: Adult Learning System in Rural Alberta

Before considering the key challenges and issues facing rural learners and adult educational providers, it is important to understand what comprises the learning system in rural Alberta. Although rural Albertans access adult educational opportunities within Edmonton and Calgary, rural-based providers face issues and challenges that in many ways distinguish them from their urban counterparts.




Alberta's rural institutions tend to be located in larger regional centres, but serve vast and sparsely populated geographic catchment areas. Community-based providers support adult learning opportunities within smaller communities. These institutions and community-based providers serve diverse client groups and structure programs to meet regional learner and labour market demands. For rural post-secondary institutions, this results in a diversity of institutional mandates. For example, colleges in northern regions structure programs and services to meet the needs of the large proportion of Aboriginal learners. Additionally, many college mandates reflect the need to support different community and economic development strategies in their regions.

The nine rural-based colleges located outside Edmonton and Calgary provide a wide range of programming, including university transfer, diploma, certificate, and preparatory and basic upgrading programs. Enrolments in diploma and certificate programs comprise the largest proportion (45%) of all rural college full-load equivalent (FLE) enrolment. Academic and job skills upgrading programs comprise a further 23% of all rural institution FLEs. Several rural-based post-secondary institutions also provide university transfer opportunities, including colleges in Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray

and Medicine Hat. A number of other institutions also provide university transfer opportunities through collaborative or brokered arrangements. Overall, enrolment in university transfer and applied degree programs represents 21% of total FLE enrolment in the rural institutions (See Appendix 5.3).

Community Consortia[1] are also involved in delivery. Established to provide programming where no institution existed, the Consortia work to bring a variety of business, academic, trades, university transfer, and even bachelor programs to many rural communities. Post-secondary institutions are partners in the Consortia with representation on Boards of Directors along with community representatives. In 2004-05, Alberta Advanced Education provided $4.3 million to the four Community Consortia, which reported a combined total of about 1,000 FLEs.

Additionally, Alberta Advanced Education provides operating grants to over 150 non-profit volunteer organizations in Alberta. These organizations provide non-credit opportunities to adult learners interested in improving their foundation skills. Alberta Advanced Education works closely with Community Adult Learning Councils to support the provision of non-credit programming in over 84 communities across Alberta. These councils improve access to learning opportunities by coordinating courses that focus on occupational enhancement, English as a second language, adult basic literacy, and other community-specific needs - particularly for individuals with special needs or barriers. Support is also provided to non-profit immigrant-serving organizations in eight Alberta communities.

A number of collaborative arrangements have also been initiated to enhance the level of access and service in rural Alberta. For example, Alberta North is a self-funded partnership of 7 institutions in Alberta, along with Aurora College in the Northwest Territories and the College of New Caledonia in BC. Alberta North maintains a network of 86 Community Access Points (CAP sites) where equipment and resources are provided to learners wishing to access post-secondary programs through distance delivery. Offering a wide array of certificate and diploma programs, Alberta North had over 1900 registrations in 2002-03.

eCampus Alberta is another collaborative arrangement. Formed as a partnership between 16 colleges and technical institutes, eCampus Alberta is focused on increasing access specifically to online learning opportunities. Participating institutions develop and deliver their own online programs and also offer other members' programs. Students register through a centralized website promoting seamless learning providing enhanced access to a wider array of programs.

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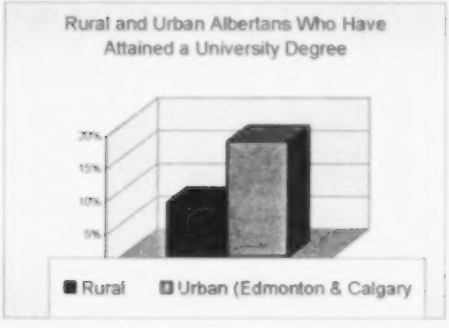
[1] Big Country Educational Consortium (Drumheller/Stettler region); Chinook Educational Consortium (Pincher Creek/Crowsnest Pass region); Pembina Educational Consortium (Drayton Valley/Whitecourt region); Yellowhead Region Educational Consortium (Edson/Jasper region).

Alberta institutions also engage in brokering on a program-by-program basis. In 2002-03, over 15 programs were delivered through brokering arrangements serving 400 students (FLE's) at Alberta institutions. Preliminary results show participation in brokered programs increased to approximately 500 FLE's in 2003-04. The majority of these programs are related to health and human services, such as Practical Nurse, Social Work, Emergency Medical Technician, and Personal Care Aide.

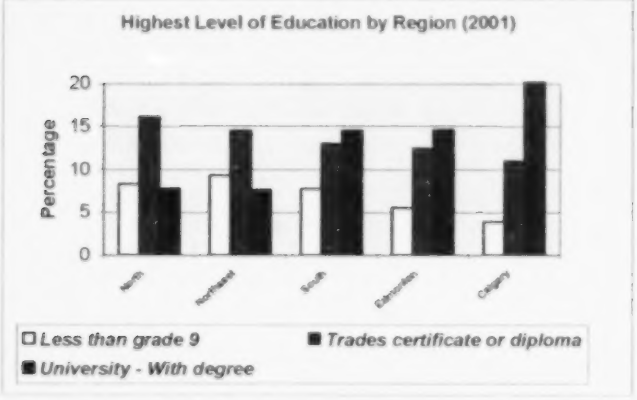
## 2 Challenges and Opportunities

The following section provides an overview of some of the key challenges faced by rural learners and post-secondary providers. In many respects, Alberta's rural regions differ when compared to urban areas in terms of relevant geographic, demographic, and economic factors. This section outlines some of the barriers to participation in adult learning for rural Albertans and identifies some of the key challenges faced by stakeholders in addressing these barriers. It also considers the potential impacts of new opportunities available through emerging technology and alternative models of program delivery.

### 2.1 Post-secondary Participation and Attainment in Rural Alberta




Rural populations face a number of related challenges, including the economic, social and demographic factors that contribute to lower participation and educational attainment levels. It is evident that rural Albertans, males, Aboriginal people, the disabled, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have lower participation and educational attainment outcomes than other Albertans. Only 46% of rural Albertans complete some form of advanced education compared to 61% of urban Albertans. Rural Albertans are almost twice as likely to not receive an education beyond grade 9 (8.4%) compared to those from Edmonton and Calgary (4.7%). Further, individuals from urban centres are almost twice as likely to attain a university education (17.5%) than those from rural areas (8.1%).




Results from Alberta Advanced Education's Accessibility Study indicate that rural students tend to have lower levels of awareness of advanced education opportunities and

the supports available. In fact, respondents from communities with populations of less than 30,000 were less likely to be aware of government financial assistance. As well, while 82% of respondents from communities with populations over 75,000 believed the benefits of advanced education outweigh the costs, only 68% of respondents from communities with populations between 5,000 and 30,000 believed likewise. The results strongly suggest that rural Albertans do not have access to the same social networks and supports that place a high priority on post-secondary education as urban Albertans, whether the main source of influence is parents, friends, guidance counselors, or other mechanisms.

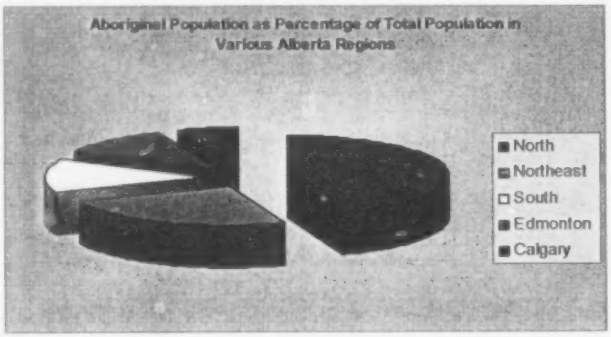
Distance from a post-secondary institution influences rural participation. Studies have found that individuals living beyond a commuting distance from a university were much more likely to attend an institution close to home such as a community college.[2] Similarly, those beyond a commuting distance from community colleges were less likely to pursue adult education than individuals with college institutions close to their area of origin. Alberta Advanced Education's Graduate Outcomes Survey confirms the participation gap between those from rural and urban origins. Over 56% of graduates from urban origins completed a university degree compared to only 39% of rural origin graduates. Conversely, a higher percentage of rural origin graduates (39%) completed a college program compared to their urban counterparts (25%).

These results indicate that the choice of institution is strongly related to proximity. In Alberta, rural students have greater physical access to community-based providers and colleges than universities. This is also reflected in the rural-urban gap related to program length and credential type. A greater proportion of rural students, 56%, engage in one and two-year programs compared to only 40% of urban students. Rural Albertans are also more likely to obtain a trades certificate (14.5%) than urban Albertans (12%).[3]

While physical distance from educational institutions poses physical and economic barriers, factors related to "rurality" such as lower parental education, lower literacy levels, lower expectations and awareness, and a reluctance to move to urban areas or incur debt, also act as obstacles. Rural students are less likely than urban students to have at least one parent with a post-secondary education (37% rural versus 50% urban). There is evidence to suggest that parents familiar with the post-secondary system are more likely to pass on knowledge and awareness of opportunities to their children as well as skills to assist them in transitioning from high school to advanced education. Rural children without this valuable influence are less likely to consider further learning opportunities, or may be less successful in completing higher levels of education. A 2005

[2] Individuals most impacted by distance in their attendance at university were from lower and middle-income backgrounds.
[3] Regional Profiles.

EKOS study confirms that Alberta parents of rural post-secondary students are less likely to provide support toward their children's education. It is unclear whether this is owing to a lack of resources or philosophical differences.




A hesitancy to relocate to urban areas and lose touch with social networks has been sited as an obstacle to rural participation/attainment at the university level. A survey of Northern Ontario residents[4] found that a striking 89% preferred to stay in their community to pursue educational and training goals. At the same time, many rural youth who do go on to pursue a post-secondary education in an urban area do not return.[5] Alberta Advanced Education's Graduate Outcomes Survey demonstrates this shift from rural to urban residency. While 40% of all post-secondary graduates completed high school in a rural area, only 14% had remained or returned two years after graduation.

Many of the factors that act as barriers to participation are closely intertwined. As a result, many rural learners face multiple barriers. Of particular concern are the barriers faced by Aboriginal Albertans, many of whom live in rural and isolated communities. 2001 census data shows that 29% of Aboriginal people had some form of post-secondary education as compared to 47% of the non-Aboriginal population. The lower attainment rates are even more pronounced at the university level with fewer than 5% of Aboriginal people earning a university degree.

The Aboriginal population is very young and steadily growing. Over 52% of the population is under 25 years of age and the school age population is expected to increase by about 26% by 2016. In fact, it is estimated that by 2011, Aboriginal students could comprise up to 15% of the school age population within the basic learning system. This young and growing population poses challenges for the learning system and highlights the need to increase Aboriginal education attainment to ensure full participation in economic and social life.

Gender differences in educational engagement have been documented at all levels of the system. Advanced Education data show that female participation rates exceed that of males at almost all levels of post-secondary enrolment with the exception of full-time college enrolments. Males are much more prevalent in apprenticeship and trade

[4] Conducted by Contact North, Ontario.
[5] *Slow Death*, featured in October 13, 2003 *TIME* issue.

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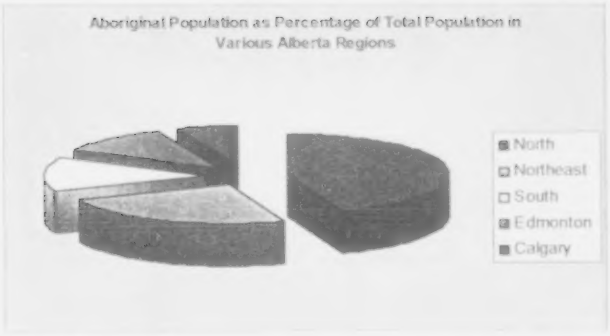


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certificate programs and females are more prevalent in certificate and university programs. Rural males are less likely to be enrolled in higher-level programs that require a lengthier and more expensive investment. A recent iteration of the Youth in Transition (YITS) study confirmed that not only are post-secondary participation rates lower for males, a gender gap exists in returning to post-secondary after discontinuing studies. Nationally, 43% of females who discontinued studying in 1999 had resumed their education by 2001. In contrast, only 28% of males had resumed their education by the same period.

While we tend to think of non-participation in advanced education as the result of barriers, it is also true that a strong economy and availability of employment is a strong motivator for potential learners to enter the labour market directly without first completing post-secondary training. The Graduate Outcomes Survey shows that almost 70% of graduates from Alberta's universities began their post-secondary studies immediately after high school. However, only 35% of graduates of colleges and technical institutes enrolled immediately after high school. This may be evidence of the greater barriers faced by rural learners, or it may suggest that rural Albertans have more opportunities to seek short-term employment that requires only a high school education. The benefits of pursuing further education may only become more apparent later in life. Included in the numerous strategies to increase direct transitions from high school are "dual credit" programs for high school learners that provide exposure to post-secondary environments and increase awareness of the benefits of attaining a post-secondary education.

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- The factors contributing to low levels of participation and educational attainment levels of rural Albertans are multiple and complex. Removing barriers and increasing participation rates for under-represented groups in rural areas will require leveraging a variety of resources.
- Student financial assistance programs can act as an incentive to increase access as well as ensure high success in program completion.
- Rural colleges and other learning providers have the potential to act as catalysts of community development by raising awareness of educational opportunities in their regions.
- Increasing the system's capacity for prior learning assessment and recognition could have positive benefits on increased access for adult learners in rural regions.
- Full participation by under-represented individuals (Aboriginal, lower SES) may require additional social and health supports in addition to flexible learning opportunities.
- The success of rural institutions in promoting access and participation is contingent upon their ability to build collaborative relationships within their communities, including with schools, Aboriginal communities and businesses.

*Questions:*

1. What strategies could be employed to increase participation of non-traditional and those under-represented within the advanced education system - including student financial assistance options?
2. What further collaborative arrangements could be leveraged/created to enhance learning opportunities for rural Albertans?

### 2.2 Demographic Trends and Sustainability in Rural Alberta

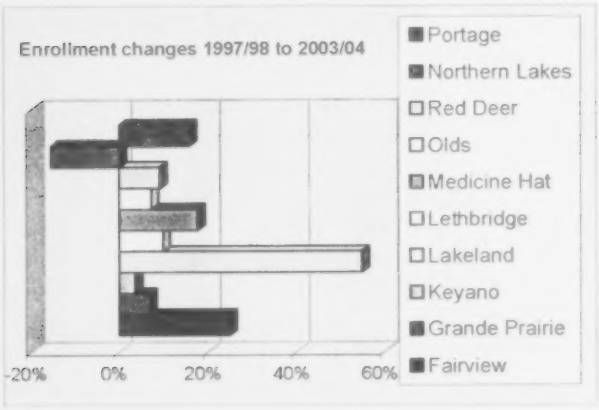
To fully understand the constraints and challenges rural institutions face in providing quality programs and services it is important to appreciate the geographic and demographic environment. Rural communities are generally defined as an area with a population less than 10,000. Based on 2001 census data, Alberta's rural population was estimated at approximately 700,000, representing less than one-quarter of Alberta's total population.

Many of the institutions located outside of Edmonton and Calgary are situated in relatively large regional centres. While not technically 'rural', they do serve large regions with sparse populations. In the north, rural colleges serve regions with less than 0.6 people per square kilometer compared to a provincial average of 4.6. For some learners, access to programs involves traveling or moving to reach local campuses or programs of choice. Rural colleges may need to apply significant resources toward marketing programs within communities located outside the regional centres to recruit new students, raise awareness and increase transitions rates. Rural colleges that serve several communities must often determine when it is beneficial to establish a satellite presence within a regional area. This places additional administrative, infrastructure and program delivery costs on rural institutions, and reduces their ability to achieve economies of scale. Consequently, rural institutions tend to operate with a higher level of fixed costs and have a more limited ability to generate revenue from alternate sources. Moreover, some ancillary services such as housing are difficult to operate on a profit or cost-recovery basis.

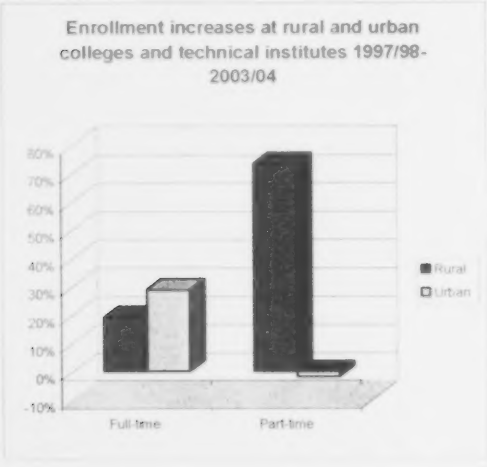
From 1971 to 2001, Alberta's rural population increased by 32%, the largest rural population growth of the western Canadian provinces. However, the rate of growth in rural Alberta has been outpaced by the growth in urban Alberta, meaning that the proportion of Alberta's population that resides in rural areas has been steadily decreasing over time. As well, this growth has not been constant throughout rural Alberta. While some communities such as Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, Canmore and Fort McMurray show strong population growth, other areas are experiencing population decline.

The age group largely associated with post-secondary education is the 18-24 age cohort. With a 25% increase between 1993 and 2003, this age group has contributed to dramatic enrolment growth in Alberta. However, the population growth of this age group has not been distributed evenly. Between 1996 and 2001, Edmonton saw an increase of 16% and

Calgary experienced a 25% increase in the 18-24 age cohort. In contrast, southern Alberta had only a 12% increase for this age group, northern Alberta experienced a 7% increase, and the northeastern region had less than a 1% increase. A quickly growing Aboriginal youth population in some rural areas may shift this population trend in the future. However, compared with urban Alberta, rural regions are unlikely to experience the significant increases in the 18-24 age group that occurred in Calgary and Edmonton (See Appendix 5.4).




Overall, in 2003-04, there were approximately 20,000 learners (FLEs) attending programs in the rural-based Alberta colleges. Although enrolment increased by 15% between 1997-98 and 2003-04, it declined as a proportion of total system enrolment. Rural learners accounted for approximately 14% of all enrolment in 2003-04 compared to 17% in 1993-94. Rates of enrolment growth have varied widely across rural institutions and demonstrate the volatility to which rural institutions are often subject. While some institutions have realized enrolment increases on the magnitude of 55% from 1997-98 to 2003-04, other rural institutions realized enrolment decreases over the same period (See Appendix 5.5).




From 1997-98 to 2003-04, part-time enrolment growth at rural colleges significantly out-paced part-time growth at urban colleges. The number of part-time students increased by almost 74% at rural institutions, which stands in sharp contrast to the 1.7% drop observed at urban institutions. Full-time growth, on the other hand showed an increase of 20% for rural colleges and 30% at urban colleges (See Appendix 5.6). This indicates that rural learners are demonstrating a higher need and/or preference for part-time learning opportunities than their urban counterparts.

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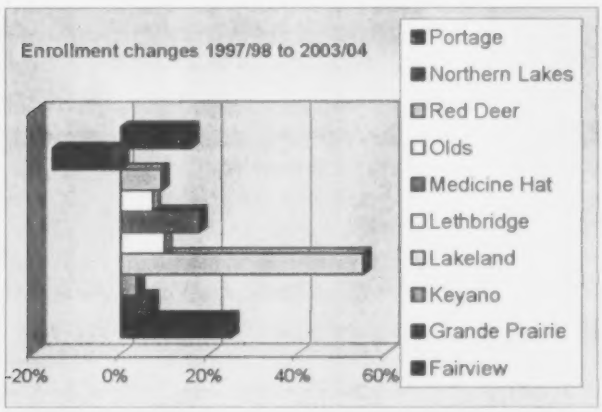


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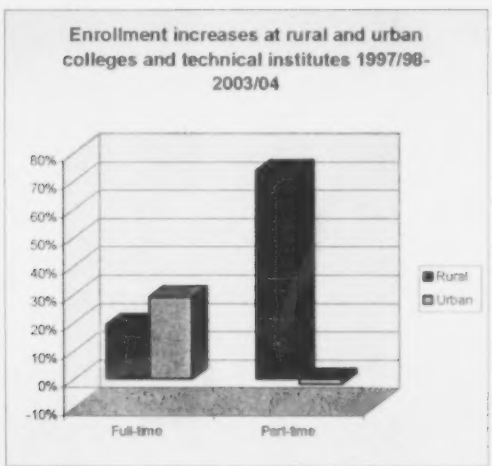


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For rural colleges, the growth of part-time enrolments is partially related to an aging trend within the student population, which creates new challenges. In some cases, older learners may have less than a high school education, little experience with post-secondary, or a great deal of time has elapsed since their last learning experience. Mature students may require additional academic or social intervention to ensure academic success. They may have family or employment commitments and be more likely to require or prefer part-time studies. Moreover, mature students over 26 years are less likely to move to attend a post-secondary institution than younger students. To promote access for mature learners and ensure learner success, flexible learning environments and recognition for prior learning and work experience are often cited as potential strategies.

Aging populations also impact faculty supply. Over the next decade, rural-based institutions, like urban institutions, may find it difficult to attract and retain faculty. Although the age profile of Alberta's university faculty, predominantly located in urban areas, is younger than most other provinces, Alberta's college/technical institute faculty is somewhat older. Global and national competition for a decreasing supply of academic faculty is an issue for many institutions in Canada. At the college level, institutions are also challenged to attract faculty and instructors away from the private sector, particularly in trades and occupations where salaries are substantially higher.

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- Rural institutions operate within a different geographic and demographic context than their urban counterparts. They serve sparse populations spread across large geographic areas creating student recruitment and program delivery challenges.
- As a consequence of these geographic and demographic factors, rural colleges tend to have higher costs associated with program development and delivery. They also tend to have less capacity to generate alternate sources of revenue and more difficulties in ensuring ancillary enterprises are profitable or cost-recoverable.
- Enrolment increases through population growth at rural colleges significantly differs from urban institutions. Rural colleges have not had access to large cohorts of 18-24 year olds, and have experienced significant enrolment increases through part-time, mature students. Providing more flexible learning opportunities for adult learners will be essential to encourage full participation.

*Questions:*

1. What can be done to enhance the capacity of rural colleges to contribute to their communities, taking into consideration the specific geographic and demographic environments in which they operate?

### 2.3 Technology

Advances in communications technology have created the potential to significantly enhance accessibility to advanced education. The use of technology in learning has allowed for a more flexible approach to learning including the ability to bridge

limitations posed by geography and time. The development of the SuperNet in Alberta allows for significant opportunities to expand access to post-secondary programs through e-learning and distance delivery.

There is a role for the expanded use of technology in the delivery of learning within rural Alberta. However, its use creates both challenges and opportunities for rural institutions. The development of on-line learning allows Albertans to access educational opportunities with fewer barriers to time and location. Technology now allows rural Albertans to have greater access to a broader range of learning opportunities delivered by Alberta-based providers, as well as providers based in other provinces and countries. At the same time, the effective use of technology has the potential to change the role of post-secondary institutions in program development and program delivery. Through enhanced collaboration in providing access to e-learning opportunities, there is less need for each institution to develop and deliver similar programs.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that not all client groups are in a position to use technology and not all programs are appropriate for e-learning environments. Face-to face contact is often of great importance to learners, especially those from under-represented groups. Services provided at colleges- such as counseling (academic, career, personal), social activities and access to the college "culture" cannot be substituted via the Internet. In addition, the increasing adoption of ICT places additional funding pressures on rural colleges through the need to provide IT support and incorporate technology into program development and curricula materials.

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- The state of technological infrastructure development in rural communities impacts the extent to which rural Albertans can benefit from distance learning.
- Developing technological infrastructure creates cost pressures for institutions.

*Questions:*

1. What opportunities can be leveraged to increase access to post-secondary programs through e-learning and distance delivery? What new opportunities can be created?
2. How effective is e-learning for under-represented groups?

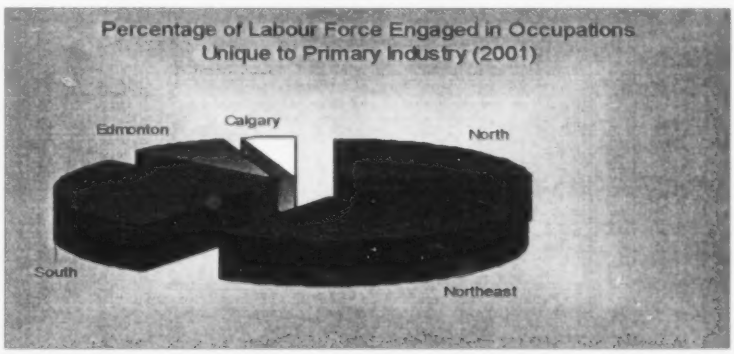
### 2.4 Role of Higher Learning in Community, Economic, and Knowledge Development

Community and economic development strategies are closely related. Both require human and social capital derived from higher education levels, skills development and the capacity for knowledge transfer. In turn, engaging in both types of development activities also results in increased human and social capital. Neither community nor economic development exists in isolation. Community development focuses on improving quality of life through greater social inclusion and civic participation.

Economic development relates to job creation and a regional return on investment. Economic prosperity also plays a complementary role in improving quality of life through sustainable employment and increased incomes for disadvantaged populations.

As noted in Rural Alberta Land of Opportunity (RALO), much of Alberta's recent economic growth has been concentrated in urban areas even though rural areas produce about one-quarter of the provincial GDP. The MLA Steering Committee on Rural Development believes it is imperative to ensure that the almost 20 percent of the provincial population residing in rural Alberta live in healthy, productive communities. The economic and social benefits of supporting rural areas will ultimately impact the entire province.

The MLA Committee noted that the economic foundation of Alberta's rural regions is less knowledge-intensive than in urban centres. Rural areas are characterized by a heavy dependency on primary industries such as forestry and agriculture. The proportion of the population living in Calgary and Edmonton engaged in primary industries was between 2.5% and 4.5% respectively (2001). In contrast, rural areas have between 12-20% of the labour force engaged in primary industries. Since these sectors are vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations, rural areas are more susceptible to market volatility. Many rural communities experience an economic boom and high demand for labour during expansionary periods, yet these same communities also experience significant contraction during economic downturns. Given the close relationship between regional economies and college programs, rural institutions must often modify their programs to respond to an increasingly dynamic labour market and ensure continued relevance.




Alberta's economic development strategy, Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity, recognizes the need to reduce our reliance on natural resources and expand our value-added industries, including manufacturing. There is also a need to expand our capacity in other emerging industries, including information and telecommunications technology, biotechnology, and life sciences. The value-added strategy recognizes that since people drive innovation, the communication of ideas and transfer of knowledge between learning institutions, rural communities and regional industries are essential.

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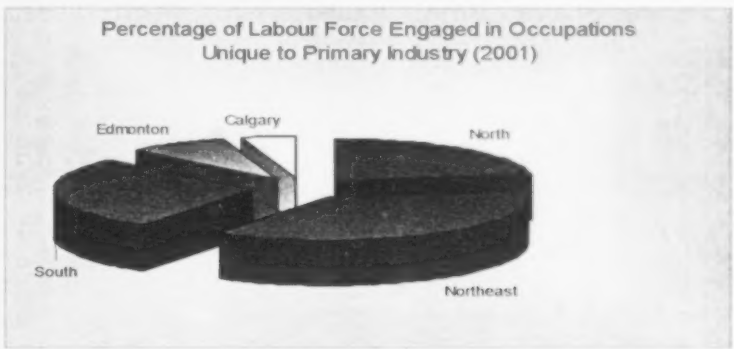


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Consequently, it is recognized that post-secondary institutions cannot operate as islands. To be responsive, institutions need to be in tune with labour demands in different occupational sectors, have the flexibility to develop new programs and respond to changing market conditions. There is little doubt that to be effective, rural institutions and community providers must establish stronger links with elementary and secondary schools, community-based organizations and local industry. There are a significant number of examples in Alberta in which businesses decided to locate within Alberta and/or within a specific region based upon a post-secondary institution's capacity to provide skilled graduates and ongoing training.

With the exception of the petrochemical industry, the majority of Alberta's industry is comprised of small and medium enterprises, making it more of a challenge to compete internationally. Many western economies have actively nurtured the development of economic "clusters" through the concentration of specific industrial sectors in different regions. It is recognized that this form of concentration helps produce a critical mass that enables industrial sectors to compete more effectively, essential in the context of global competition. A collaborative approach to economic development allows for synergy and a better capacity to leverage Alberta's economic strengths.

The role of post-secondary institutions in supporting economic clusters is well recognized. Collaboration between public institutions and industry enables knowledge transfer to the private sector and the development of a skilled and knowledgeable work force. Where strong relationships exist among post-secondary institutions and industry, institutions are able to capitalize on enhanced awareness of industry and labour market needs and structure programs to meet those needs. Through collaborative arrangements, rural-based colleges have increased opportunity to work with industry to identify export opportunities, or develop local management capacity.

With the proclamation of Alberta's *Post-secondary Learning Act* in 2004, provision has now been made for colleges and technical institutes to undertake applied research to foster innovation. This provision recognizes the important role of applied research in stimulating innovation and economic development. Colleges and technical institutes can now conduct applied research on a cost-recovery basis to support the needs of business or public sector sponsored research. In rural regions, applied research supports regional economic drivers, such as agriculture or energy, and promotes innovation and application of new technologies.

Although primary industries are becoming more knowledge based, many youth opt to work during times of economic expansion particularly in high wage industries associated with natural resources. In some cases, the return on investment for attaining a post-secondary education does not seem to outweigh the more immediate benefits of employment. It is possible that many youth who are adverse to debt see higher risks and higher opportunity costs associated with pursing post-secondary education. Eventually,

these individuals may determine the opportune time for a post-secondary education is when their personal economic circumstances have worsened. For many, making the transition to post-secondary education at later stages in life is more difficult.

Rural post-secondary institutions are in a unique position to support community and economic development. Rural colleges are repositories of knowledge and human resources, and provide the appropriate environment in which to foster innovation and new ideas. As deliverers of higher education, they develop human and social capital, as well as the skills required by regional labour market needs.

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- Rural institutions are vital for ensuring rural populations have opportunities to increase education and skill levels foundational to increased human and social capital.
- Rural institutions have an important role in building sustainable regional economies by producing a skilled and knowledgeable work force. Programs and course offerings need to reflect regional labour market needs.
- There is a need to strengthen community colleges' ability to respond to regional economic needs as well as their capacity to transfer knowledge to industry. The provisions of the *Post-secondary Learning Act* enabling an enhanced role for colleges in the area of applied research is one avenue to promote knowledge transfer.
- The cyclical nature of rural economies results in significant costs to community based institutions. There is a need to continually evaluate and adapt programs to meet industry and labour demands.

*Questions:*

1. How can rural institutions leverage resources to ensure rural Albertans have the chance to increase their skill levels, and that rural communities can benefit from development of human resources and the creation of new knowledge? What new arrangements and partnerships may be fostered?

### 2.5 Program Delivery, Governance, and System Collaboration

Since the rural-based institutions were first created in Alberta, their evolution and mandates have been strongly influenced by geography. The colleges have tended to serve a client base within defined geographic catchment areas. By and large, each college had an exclusive mandate to develop and deliver programs, hire faculty to serve the needs of the regional population, and issue credentials upon completion. And, if an individual required a program not offered at the local college, they would need to move to where the program was offered.

This model has a number of drawbacks. Rural institutions may find themselves delivering high-cost but low-demand programs to meet the needs of small numbers of learners. This is particularly the case if an institution predominantly designs, develops

and delivers a program locally. Not only is this approach not sustainable, it is also unlikely that any one institution can provide a wide breadth of high quality programming in house.

Within this context, it is important to consider the range of alternative vehicles by which an institution can provide quality programming within a given region of the province. For one, an institution can use established curricula from other institutions that have demonstrated expertise. In other circumstances, it may make sense for the two institutions to work collaboratively to deliver the program. In still other circumstances, a local institution may simply provide the administrative infrastructure, facility, library and computing resources to support instruction and on-site delivery by another institution. A further alternative is that a regional institution provides the support necessary so that a student can complete their program through e-learning or distance education. Finally, it may make sense for an institution to establish a presence within another region of the province provided there is a demand for their program areas. Potentially, the effective application of these delivery approaches may allow for expanded access to quality programming within rural Alberta. These alternatives may allow for greater responsiveness in rural areas, particularly given the cyclical nature of demand within regional economies.

Alberta's rural institutions have engaged in many of these collaborative approaches. Since, the arrangements occur on a program-by-program basis, there is a high degree of diversity among arrangements. The key question to consider is to what extent can these collaborative approaches be leveraged to a greater degree to expand access? It is estimated that within Alberta there are fewer than 600 FLEs associated with these forms of collaboration. It is important to understand the impediments to further expansion of collaborative delivery within the system, including funding, enrolment reporting, cost-sharing, or accountability mechanisms.

A further consideration in the continuing evolution of the system is the role of Community Consortia. Consortia were originally established in a time period when geography was critical. They were established to serve areas in which other institutions did not have a presence. With a reduced importance on geography, emergence of technology, and considering that many institutions now offer programs within the same regions in which Consortia were established, it is important to consider whether the Consortia might be merged with the regional post-secondary institutions.

The evolution of Alberta's rural college sector has been strongly influenced by geography and its influence on both the learner and the institution remains strong. Today, with the emergence of alternative forms of delivery and increased application of technology, the pervasive influence of geography has been lessened. However, the predominant delivery model still in existence today is to design, develop and deliver locally. With growing labour market needs, the proliferation and specialization of programs within a knowledge

economy, a need to provide the learner with a broader range of program and delivery alternatives, and the challenge of faculty attraction and retention, we need to question whether this approach is sustainable. We also need to question whether this approach is best to provide the learner with high quality programs or if other approaches are more appropriate (See Appendix 5.7).

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- Alberta's rural-based institutions have been strongly influenced by geography, although it is less important today in the context of e-learning and alternative delivery.
- The need to maintain sustainability while ensuring access to a breadth of quality program areas will necessitate a change in the way of doing business.
- It will be important to identify the barriers to further expansion of collaborative approaches to delivery and ways in which collaborative approaches can be leveraged further.

*Questions:*

1. What are the barriers to expansion of collaborative approaches to program delivery?
2. What recommendations can be made concerning future system development, including the mandates of rural institutions, to allow for long-term sustainability of the system?

### 2.6 Community Collaboration and Creating a Learning Culture

In consideration of demographic, geographic, social, and economic challenges in Alberta, it is clear that increasing the participation of rural Albertans is fundamental. It is also clear that increasing participation rates, particularly among disadvantaged populations poses a significant challenge on its own. Innovative strategies will have to be employed to meet the government's commitment to revitalize community and economic development in rural Alberta, increase the number of Albertans participating in advanced education, and create a learning society. Stimulating innovative thinking requires the involvement of diverse community stakeholders. Communities themselves – represented by community organizations, parents, students, schools, post-secondary institutions, Community Consortia, Community Adult Learning Councils, private sector industry – are best situated to identifying emerging issues and barriers, as well as develop creative solutions to increase access and participation.

Furthermore, the path to and throughout adult learning has become less linear, particularly at the college level, and the profile of typical learners has changed. Rural learners are more likely to be older, married, or have dependents. They are more likely to have delayed entry into adult education, have received some work experience, and to prefer or require part-time learning opportunities. Many learners stop-out or change programs before resuming studies at a later date. Many require academic upgrading or

foundational skills development such as literacy in order to access credential programs. Reaching out and assisting non-traditional learners will require aligning resources, policies, and programs through a multi-sectoral approach.

Rural colleges form a fundamental component of rural community infrastructure and have a role to play as catalysts for community renewal. Aside from creating an educated society, colleges act as repositories of knowledge and expertise that may be made available to community leaders, organizations, and private sector. As such, they serve as a hub for knowledge networks bringing together those with common interests – both those who have knowledge and expertise and those who need it. Colleges can also offer its physical infrastructure in terms of buildings and equipment to community organizations and those interested in economic development. If colleges are to fulfill this role, they must be supported to work with Aboriginal communities, elementary and secondary schools, literacy groups, children services, and other community organizations. Collaborative structures and mechanisms are required to raise awareness of higher learning opportunities and benefits and increase participation in advanced education. Through collaborative outreach strategies, potential learners from non-traditional and disadvantaged populations could be motivated and assisted in pursuing advanced education.

A collaborative approach could be used to develop regional Adult Learning Access Plans in Alberta. The involvement and contribution of rural community stakeholders would ensure access plans reflect unique regional circumstances and economic needs. In turn, collaborative structures, mechanisms, and strategies support the development of rural networks and social infrastructure, as well as increasing social capital and civic engagement in rural Alberta. Finally, strategies developed from within communities through a collaborative approach remain the best vehicle to stimulate a learning culture.

*Summary of Key Issues:*

- Innovative strategies will have to be employed to increase the participation of rural Albertans and other disadvantaged groups in higher learning.
- To be effective, strategies will have to be collaborative- they need to emerge from community level planning and be multifaceted and multi-sectoral.
- Within this collaborative framework, a key role will have to be defined for rural colleges.

*Questions:*

1. What strategies can be employed to facilitate a higher degree of collaboration at the community level, and to increase the level of engagement of all community stakeholders in advanced education?

## 3 Conclusion

A number of challenges impacting the engagement of rural Albertans in adult learning opportunities have been identified in this document. Issues of geography, social and economic circumstances as well as demographic patterns contribute to lower levels of rural participation and attainment at almost all levels of the system. Sparse populations and longer distances from institutions create challenges for access, participation and program delivery. Further, studies have shown that certain socio-economic (social and cultural) obstacles have an even greater impact than distance with regard to access and participation. Demographic characteristics of rural communities such as stagnating younger populations and a steadily growing older generation present challenges, as does the high concentration of primary industries as main economic drivers.

Advanced Education has set important goals for expanding the post-secondary system by 60,000 learning opportunities, providing high quality educational opportunities for all, and meeting the needs of a global, knowledge economy. Critical to meeting these objectives will be to ensure the system is best configured to maximize access for non-traditional learners. Increasing participation rates for under-represented groups, including rural, low SES and Aboriginal Albertans, and ensuring the adult learning system has the capacity to serve these new potential learners are fundamental priorities. Working together to give all citizens the opportunity to reach their full potential will strengthen our province and ensure Alberta thrives, economically and socially, in the new millennium.

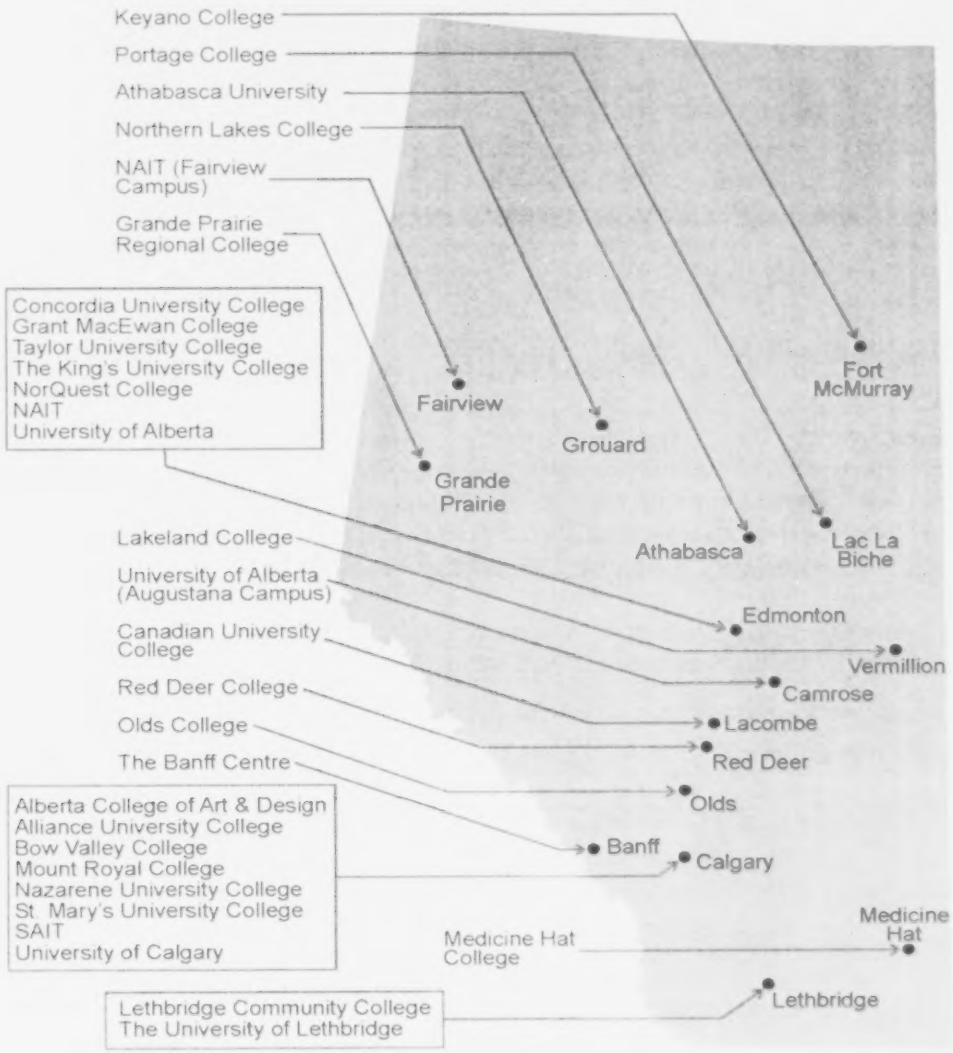
## 4 Key Questions

1. What strategies could be employed to increase participation of non-traditional learners and those under-represented within the advanced education system - including student financial assistance options?
2. What can be done to enhance the capacity of rural colleges to contribute to their communities, taking into consideration the specific geographic and demographic environments in which they operate?
3. What opportunities are there to increase access to post-secondary programs through e-learning and distance delivery?
4. How effective is e-learning for under-represented groups?
5. How can rural institutions leverage resources to ensure rural Albertans have the chance to increase their skill levels, and that rural communities can benefit from development of human resources and the creation of new knowledge? What new arrangements and partnerships may be fostered?

6. What are the barriers to expansion of collaborative approaches to program delivery?
7. What recommendations can be made concerning future system development, including the mandates of rural institutions, to allow for long-term sustainability of the system?
8. What strategies can be employed to facilitate a higher degree of collaboration at the community level, and to increase the level of engagement of all community stakeholders in advanced education?

# 5 Appendices

## 5.1 Publicly Funded Post-secondary Institutions in Alberta



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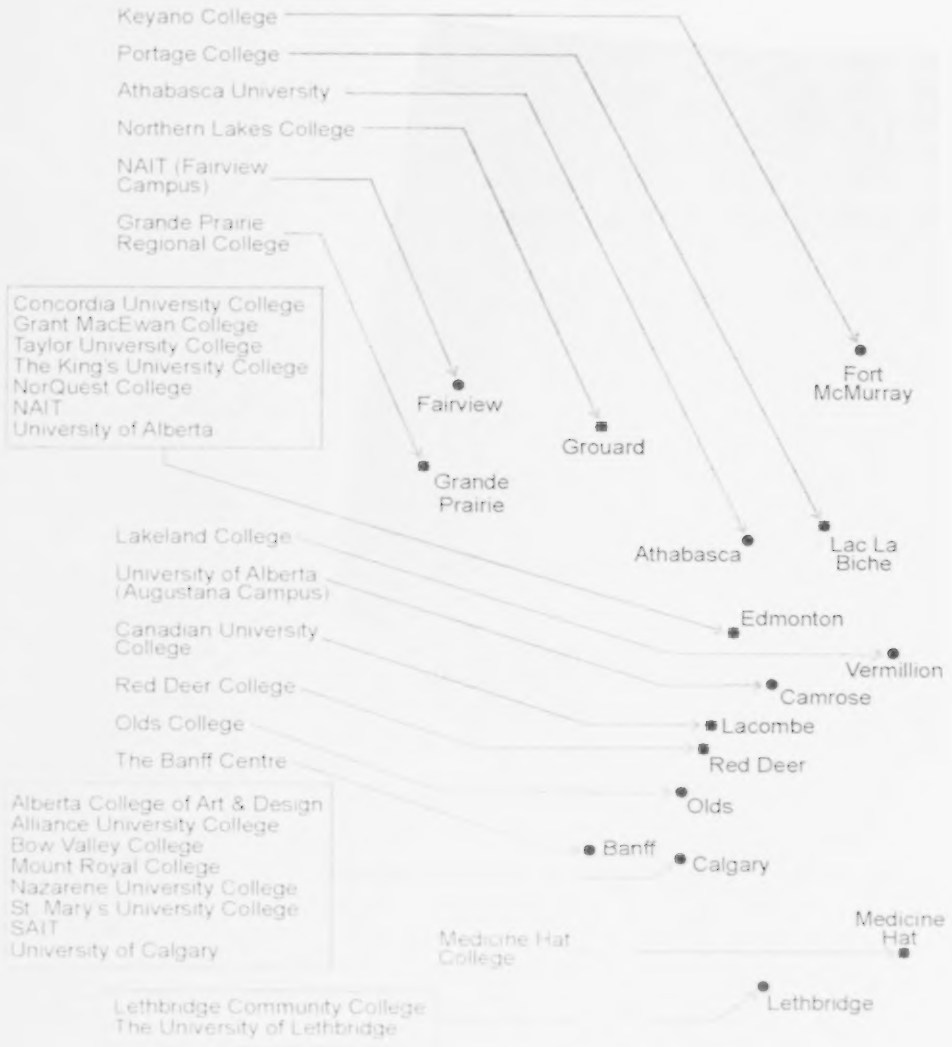

## 5.2 Rural Colleges Unduplicated Headcount 2003-04

| | Full Time | Part Time |
|---|---|---|
| Fairview College | 1,446 | 5,064 |
| Grande Prairie Regional College | 1,737 | 696 |
| Keyano College | 1,731 | 634 |
| Lakeland College | 2,963 | 5,526 |
| Lethbridge Community College | 5,077 | 2,215 |
| Medicine Hat College | 2,707 | 2,225 |
| Northern Lakes College | 887 | 337 |
| Olds College | 1,385 | 546 |
| Portage College | 1,353 | 274 |
| Red Deer College | 5,335 | 1,231 |
| **Total** | **24,621** | **18,748** |

## 5.3 FLE Enrolments by Program Type 2003-04

| | FLE | Proportion of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Applied Degree | 460.58 | 2.5% |
| Apprenticeship | 1,344.65 | 7.4% |
| Certificate | 2,779.52 | 15.3% |
| Diploma | 5,381.34 | 29.6% |
| General Studies | 418.66 | 2.3% |
| Other Career/Post-Diploma | 66.80 | 0.4% |
| Preparatory/Basic Upgrading | 3,069.12 | 16.9% |
| Skill Training | 1,153.34 | 6.3% |
| Trade Certificate | 207.39 | 1.1% |
| University Transfer | 3,303.62 | 18.2% |
| **All Program Types** | **18,185.03** | |

## 5.4 Population Change, Alberta Jurisdictions, 1996 and 2001

| North | 1996 | 2001 | Change | % Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 18 | 61,070 | 61,865 | 795 | 1.3% |
| 18-24 | 19,515 | 20,865 | 1,350 | 6.9% |
| 25-44 | 62,660 | 65,165 | 2,505 | 4.0% |
| 45-64 | 30,870 | 39,715 | 8,845 | 28.7% |
| 65+ | 10,635 | 12,980 | 2,345 | 22.0% |
| **Total** | **184,750** | **200,590** | **15,840** | **8.6%** |
| **Northeast** | **1996** | **2001** | | |
| Under 18 | 44,110 | 43,415 | -695 | -1.6% |
| 18-24 | 12,605 | 12,655 | 50 | 0.4% |
| 25-44 | 46,415 | 44,625 | -1,790 | -3.9% |
| 45-64 | 29,490 | 34,195 | 4,705 | 16.0% |
| 65+ | 19,815 | 21,025 | 1,210 | 6.1% |
| **Total** | **152,435** | **155,915** | **3,480** | **2.3%** |
| **South** | **1996** | **2001** | | |
| Under 18 | 71,875 | 70,805 | -1,070 | -1.5% |
| 18-24 | 24,565 | 27,450 | 2,885 | 11.7% |
| 25-44 | 74,160 | 72,620 | -1,540 | -2.1% |
| 45-64 | 47,830 | 58,195 | 10,365 | 21.7% |
| 65+ | 33,185 | 36,180 | 2,995 | 9.0% |
| **Total** | **251,615** | **265,250** | **13,635** | **5.4%** |
| **Calgary** | **1996** | **2001** | | |
| Under 18 | 227,395 | 247,510 | 20,115 | 8.8% |
| 18-24 | 84,625 | 105,685 | 21,060 | 24.9% |
| 25-44 | 326045 | 357,060 | 31,015 | 9.5% |
| 45-64 | 172,300 | 229,535 | 57,235 | 33.2% |
| 65+ | 76,370 | 92,860 | 16,490 | 21.6% |
| **Total** | **886,735** | **1,032,650** | **145,915** | **16.5%** |
| **Edmonton** | **1996** | **2001** | | |
| Under 18 | 265,035 | 265,525 | 490 | 0.2% |
| 18-24 | 97,720 | 113,050 | 15,330 | 15.7% |
| 25-44 | 337,430 | 336,885 | -545 | -0.2% |
| 45-64 | 200,745 | 247,195 | 46,450 | 23.1% |
| 65+ | 99,325 | 116,980 | 17,655 | 17.8% |
| **Total** | **1,000,255** | **1,079,635** | **79,380** | **7.9%** |

## 5.5 FLE's by Gender, 1997-98 to 2003-04

| | | 1997-98 | 1998-99 | 1999-00 | 2000-01 | 2001-02 | 2002-03 | 2003-04 | % Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fairview College | F | 333.1 | 405.0 | 278.2 | 289.0 | 337.7 | 391.2 | 356.4 | |
| | M | 501.3 | 530.3 | 439.8 | 510.6 | 560.3 | 688.4 | 685.6 | |
| | **T** | **834.4** | **935.3** | **718.0** | **799.6** | **898.0** | **1,079.6** | **1,042.0** | **24.9** |
| Grande Prairie Regional College | F | 943.5 | 939.6 | 1,000.1 | 1,018.3 | 1,054.5 | 1,098.7 | 1,073.4 | |
| | M | 469.1 | 480.7 | 507.5 | 516.7 | 466.4 | 468.8 | 435.7 | |
| | **T** | **1,412.6** | **1,420.3** | **1,507.6** | **1,535.0** | **1,520.9** | **1,567.5** | **1,509.1** | **6.8** |
| Keyano College | F | 736.4 | 801.4 | 749.8 | 692.2 | 737.8 | 727.4 | 733.8 | |
| | M | 525.3 | 568.9 | 606.3 | 513.0 | 530.0 | 551.0 | 572.3 | |
| | **T** | **1,261.6** | **1,370.3** | **1,356.0** | **1,205.2** | **1,267.8** | **1,278.3** | **1,306.1** | **3.5** |
| Lakeland College | F | 688.5 | 654.6 | 754.3 | 798.8 | 820.5 | 889.5 | 877.7 | |
| | M | 597.7 | 654.8 | 694.4 | 858.9 | 953.0 | 1,056.9 | 1,112.2 | |
| | **T** | **1,286.1** | **1,309.3** | **1,448.7** | **1,657.7** | **1,773.5** | **1,946.5** | **1,989.9** | **54.7** |
| Lethbridge Community College | F | 1,882.0 | 1,943.9 | 2,038.3 | 2,104.6 | 2,168.8 | 2,251.3 | 2,098.9 | |
| | M | 1,879.3 | 1,789.6 | 1,924.6 | 2,027.3 | 2,086.3 | 2,112.7 | 2,031.8 | |
| | **T** | **3,761.3** | **3,733.5** | **3,962.9** | **4,131.9** | **4,255.1** | **4,363.9** | **4,130.7** | **9.8** |
| Medicine Hat College | F | 1,337.6 | 1,391.1 | 1,572.8 | 1,624.3 | 1,511.8 | 1,620.3 | 1,573.1 | |
| | M | 703.4 | 775.3 | 792.3 | 796.7 | 808.7 | 876.6 | 827.3 | |
| | **T** | **2,041.0** | **2,166.4** | **2,365.0** | **2,421.1** | **2,320.5** | **2,496.9** | **2,400.4** | **17.6** |
| Olds College | F | 524.2 | 565.9 | 556.5 | 567.2 | 568.1 | 620.2 | 626.3 | |
| | M | 645.2 | 673.1 | 699.3 | 648.9 | 642.9 | 610.5 | 627.5 | |
| | **T** | **1,169.4** | **1,239.0** | **1,255.8** | **1,216.1** | **1,211.0** | **1,230.7** | **1,253.9** | **7.2** |
| Red Deer College | F | 2,194.9 | 2,176.1 | 2,196.6 | 2,234.0 | 2,287.5 | 2,392.3 | 2,357.0 | |
| | M | 1,255.3 | 1,332.8 | 1,386.2 | 1,307.0 | 1,256.9 | 1,392.6 | 1,410.9 | |
| | **T** | **3,450.2** | **3,508.9** | **3,582.8** | **3,541.1** | **3,544.4** | **3,785.0** | **3,767.8** | **9.2** |
| Northern Lakes College | F | 783.2 | 835.3 | 886.9 | 795.1 | 752.4 | 718.8 | 615.8 | |
| | M | 252.4 | 344.4 | 399.8 | 274.2 | 255.5 | 287.7 | 259.3 | |
| | **T** | **1,035.5** | **1,179.7** | **1,286.7** | **1,069.3** | **1,007.9** | **1,006.5** | **875.1** | **-15.5** |
| Portage College | F | 617.4 | 741.0 | 654.0 | 601.2 | 642.7 | 572.1 | 589.3 | |
| | M | 305.2 | 430.5 | 374.3 | 339.5 | 411.3 | 404.9 | 479.2 | |
| | **T** | **922.6** | **1,171.5** | **1,028.3** | **940.6** | **1,054.0** | **977.0** | **1,068.6** | **15.8** |

## 5.6 Rural College Enrolment Changes 1997-98 to 2003-04

| | Full Time | Part Time |
|---|---|---|
| Fairview College | 8.6% | 457.7% |
| Grande Prairie Regional College | 10.4% | 14.3% |
| Keyano College | -1.5% | -8.1% |
| Lakeland College | 69.7% | 927.1% |
| Lethbridge Community College | 13.0% | 18.3% |
| Medicine Hat College | 18.2% | 35.4% |
| Northern Lakes College | 3.6% | -87.9% |
| Olds College | 0.4% | 35.8% |
| Portage College | 68.1% | 5.4% |
| Red Deer College | 20.6% | 14.4% |
| **Total** | **19.2%** | **73.9%** |

## 5.7 Advanced Education strategies and initiatives in support of the Rural Development Initiative

- **Bill 1, the *Access to the Future Act***, was introduced in March of 2005. As part of Bill 1, Alberta will establish a $3-billion endowment fund to strengthen the province's post-secondary learning system. Rural Albertans will share in the benefits of an improved post-secondary system.
- ***Tuition rebate*** - this September (2005) the Alberta government will pay for any tuition fee increases at public, board-governed, post-secondary institutions, including rural institutions. It is estimated the tuition rebate will save students an estimated $43 million.
- ***Raising Awareness About Planning for Post-Secondary Studies Initiative*** includes various innovative strategies to promote the benefits of post-secondary education and the importance of early planning to students and parents.
- ***Augustana University College's*** partnership with the University of Alberta and the ***NAIT-Fairview partnership*** increase access to degree opportunities and technical training in rural Alberta.
- **The *Post-secondary Learning Act*** allows for increased access to degree opportunities at colleges and technical institutes.
- ***The Campus Alberta Quality Council,*** created by the *Post-secondary Learning Act*, provides for expansion of quality program opportunities. New spaces created under the Access fund to allow for increased participation by rural Albertans.
- ***Targeted student financial assistance*** including Northern Alberta Development Council bursaries, Northern Student Supplement grants, and student loans.

- ***The post-secondary funding review*** will be consistent with a "rural lens" approach as well as meeting the recommendation to consider incentives for post-secondary institutions delivering programs in rural areas. The proposed review includes an examination of the financial challenges and needs of rural institutions in terms of overall funding adequacy, as well as funding equity and the distribution of funds throughout the post-secondary system.
- ***eCampus Alberta, Albert North and the four Community Consortia*** increase access to a wide range of post-secondary programming for rural Alberta students.
- ***The use of brokering, e-learning, and alternative delivery*** are broadening the range of certificate, diploma, and university programs available to rural Alberta students.
- ***Community Programs*** such as Community Adult Learning Councils, grants to volunteer adult tutor adult literacy programs, and family literacy grants address the needs of adult learners in rural communities.
- ***Various apprenticeship initiatives*** such as IOP (Integrated Occupational Program) curriculum, Apprenticeship and Industry Training Scholarships and the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP), the Youth Apprenticeship Project (YAP) and alternate delivery of apprenticeship technical training through distance delivery and mobile delivery.

### 5.8 Advanced Education 2005-08 Business Plan strategies to increase engagement of rural Albertans.

Advanced Education outlines a number of strategies in the 2005-08 Business Plan that pertain to increasing the post-secondary participation and engagement of rural learners. Strategies:

**2.2** Develop strategies to increase participation in learning opportunities by Aboriginal, immigrant, and other underrepresented groups.

**2.3** Review affordability and improve the design and delivery of student financial assistance to continue to ensure that financial need is not a barrier to participation in advanced education opportunities.

**2.4** Enhance the knowledge and awareness of parents and learners about planning for post-secondary studies.

**2.5** Improve learning access for Albertans by enhancing transitions into and within the advanced education system.

**2.6** Provide opportunities in local communities for adults including Aboriginal, immigrant, and other underrepresented groups to return to learning to meet their personal learning and employment goals.